





THE COMEDY of TERRORS

— Cast —

VINCENT PRICE as Waldo Trumbull

PETER LORRE as Felix Gillie

BORIS KARLOFF as Amos Hinchley

JOYCE JAMESON as Amaryllis Trumbull

BASIL RATHBONE as Mr. Black

BEVERLY HILLS as Mrs. Phipps

JOE E. BROWN as Cemetery Keeper

and RHUBARB THE CAT as Cleopatra

— Crew —

Directed by JACQUES TOURNEUR

Produced by JAMES H. NICHOLSON & SAMUEL Z. ARKOFF

Written by RICHARD MATHESON

Director of Photography FLOYD CROSBY

Editor ANTHONY CARRAS

Music by LES BAXTER

Contents

- 3 CREDITS
- 7 OUTSIDER SPIRITS:
JACQUES TOURNEUR,
RICHARD MATHESON AND
THE COMEDY OF TERRORS
by Chris Fujiwara
- 22 ABOUT THE TRANSFER





Outsider Spirits: Jacques Tourneur, Richard Matheson and The Comedy of Terrors

by Chris Fujiwara

Displacement marked Jacques Tourneur's relationship to American cinema. Born in France in 1904, he accompanied his father, the great director Maurice Tourneur, to the United States when the elder Tourneur's career brought him there in 1914, then followed him back again to Europe in 1928. It was after this return to France that Jacques Tourneur's own career began, first as assistant and editor on his father's films, then as a director. In 1934, the younger Tourneur again went to America, where he served what amounted to a second apprenticeship directing short films and second units on features before being entrusted with the direction of low-budget features.

His work on the first three films of the Val Lewton unit at RKO, *Cat People* (1942), *I Walked with a Zombie* and *The Leopard Man* (both 1943), won Tourneur a promotion to higher budgets and more prestigious projects, such as *Canyon Passage* (1946), *Out of the Past* (1947) and *The Flame and the Arrow* (1950). However, by the mid-1950s, Tourneur was back in the lower rungs of Hollywood, directing quick programmers with faded stars. The reasons why he failed to sustain a career as a commercially important director (in contrast with his fellow Lewton alumni, Mark Robson and Robert Wise) are complex, but perhaps they can be boiled down to a different kind of displacement from the geographical movements that decided the early stages of his career. Content to work in popular genres (horror, the Western, the thriller, the adventure film),

Tourneur always approached these genres from a distanced and oblique perspective, too much an artist to provide the merely formulaic product that was the minimum demanded of him, too much an outsider (by culture and sensibility) to share in the routine pleasures of formula.

In horror, Tourneur's (and Lewton's) preference was for what could not be seen and what could not be understood. Whatever their genre, Tourneur's films are works of ambiguity and paradox, in which the protagonists' courses of action and even their motives are plunged into doubt as they progress through the director's richly-layered *mise-en-scène*, mottled with shadow and filled with traps. The late masterpiece *Night of the Demon* (1957) offers a quintessential example of this process: through a series of unnerving encounters and strange events, a rationalist who at first scoffs at the belief in the supernatural is finally led to conclude, "It's better not to know".

By 1963, the year of *The Comedy of Terrors*, Tourneur had been working for some time – mostly for television, which he found remunerative but artistically unrewarding. He had not directed a feature film since *La battaglia di Maratona* (*The Giant of Marathon*, in 1959), an Italian peplum starring Steve Reeves, and even television work was becoming difficult to come by. Tourneur had just finished an episode for *The Twilight Zone* television series, *Night Call* (which was first broadcast in February 1964), starring Gladys Cooper as an elderly recluse who believes she is receiving telephonic communications from the dead. The writer of *Night Call* was Richard Matheson, a talented writer of imaginative fiction who had entered films by adapting his own novel into the screenplay of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957; directed by Jack Arnold). According to Matheson, it was at his own suggestion that Tourneur was hired for *Night Call*, and it took some persuasion:

Every time I mentioned Tourneur's name before he got the *Twilight Zone* assignment, the answer I always got was something like, "Oh, well, yes, a great director but he's too old [Tourneur was in fact 58], he's used to taking too much time, we can't afford that sort of thing anymore." So what does Jacques Tourneur do but shoot, to my knowledge, the shortest shooting schedule ever managed on a half-hour *Twilight Zone* segment. The man is so organised he couldn't possibly take too long.

Matheson had been an important member of the American International Pictures (AIP) family since 1960, when he wrote the script for *House of Usher* (sometimes called *The Fall of the House of Usher*), based on Edgar Allan Poe's story. The success of the film created demand for further Poe adaptations, and Matheson dutifully supplied screenplays for *Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *Tales of Terror* (1962) and *The Raven* (1963). All these films were produced and directed by Roger Corman and starred Vincent Price. *House of Usher* was dead serious, but the possibility for self-parody in the series was obvious, and Matheson and Corman were not slow to exploit it. (In this they were both inspired and aided by their regular star's increasing tendency toward camp.) "The Black Cat", the central episode of the three *Tales of Terror*, contained elements of comedy; emboldened, Corman and Matheson turned *The Raven* into an all-out farce. The box-office receipts convinced AIP that playing horror for comedy was a sound approach, and Matheson wrote another comic script, *The Comedy of Terrors*. Once again, Matheson recommended Tourneur, and the director was hired. Tourneur admired Matheson's script, in which he saw the chance for a return to his cultural roots: "a cynical, cynical comedy, a little bit in the old René Clair tradition." He may also have seen it as another chance to "mix fear and the ridiculous" as he once said he loved doing, citing the scene of a fake clown's death in his *Berlin Express* (1948).

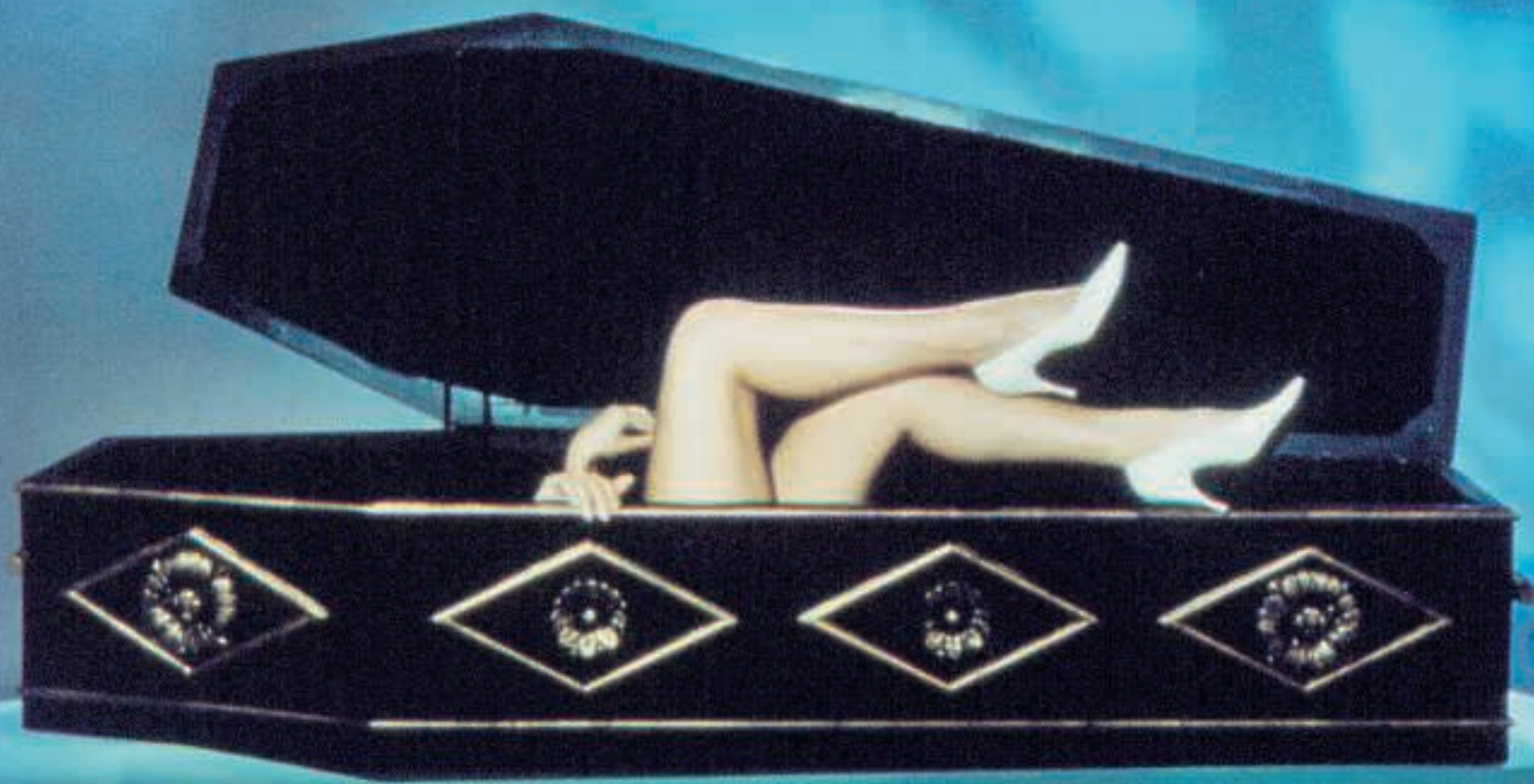


The production saw Price again teamed with Peter Lorre, co-star of *Tales of Terror* and *The Raven*, as Trumbull and Gillie, impoverished undertakers in a 19th-century New England town who are forced to murder people in order to keep their business afloat. Boris Karloff, the third co-star of *The Raven*, and Basil Rathbone, who had appeared in *Tales of Terror*, rounded out the cast. Karloff was originally cast as Mr Black, the undertakers' landlord and latest victim, who suffers from catalepsy and, apparently dead, keeps reviving to terrorise the pair; Rathbone was to play Hinchley, Trumbull's senile father-in-law. Before shooting started, it became clear that the role of Hinchley was better suited to Karloff's frail physical condition than the more active role of Black, and he and Rathbone switched parts. Lorre was also in poor health and had to be replaced by a stunt double (Harvey Parry, wearing a rubber mask) in most shots when he was required to do anything more strenuous than walk across the set.

Matheson designed *The Comedy of Terrors* as a parody of the Poe films he had written for Corman. One of the recurrent themes of the Corman-Poe series, the premature interment of someone who is actually alive, is played for laughs in *The Comedy of Terrors*, after looming as something like the ultimate horror in *House of Usher*, *Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Premature Burial* (1962, not written by Matheson). Black's catchphrase, "What place is this?", is a line spoken by Vincent Price's dead-but-alive Valdemar in the third episode of the *Tales of Terror*. Poe's terrifying black cat is replaced by the harmless housecat Cleopatra (played by a cat billed as Rhubarb). Perhaps Tourneur, in whose fortunes a film about cats had played such a decisive role, built up the cat's part in *The Comedy of Terrors*: Cleopatra appears in numerous scenes as a witness to the human doings; Trumbull takes her along on the expedition to murder Black; and, under the end credits, Cleopatra even gets a whole sequence to herself, prowling the sets and narrowly escaping being trapped in the undertakers' coffin.

Matheson, who did not think highly of Corman's talent as a director ("He has been able to make films which move and have suspense and look good. I don't believe he has ever worked with actors particularly, and this is the weakness in his films, I think"), had nothing but praise for Tourneur. Interviewed about his films for AIP, Matheson said he thought *The Comedy of Terrors* "the best of the lot, of course, because Tourneur directed". The humour of *The Comedy of Terrors* is very different from that of *The Raven*. If Corman's film is a light-hearted and rather gentle fantasy, in which most of the laughs come from the building-up of the cowardly supporting character played by Lorre, *The Comedy of Terrors* is a ferocious, if also brittle, black comedy. Tourneur was conscious of the difference. After his film was released to disappointing box office, Tourneur commented: "Roger Corman – his films, as far as I'm concerned, are adapted to young people, children – they're not for adults. Ours was extremely adult... [O]ur film was deliberately aimed at the mature thinking people who appreciate satire, who appreciate cynical humour – therefore it was completely lost on the kids who were looking for horror and they didn't get it."

Tourneur later declared himself disappointed with the film, for reasons on which he declined to elaborate. "I wasn't too happy with *The Comedy of Terrors*, and don't want to talk about it, not on record, anyway." According to Matheson, the director "only had a two-week shooting schedule, and he wasn't too happy with the heaviness of the actors' approach to comedy, which may or may not be true. He visualised it more as a very crisp British comedy, and felt that only Rathbone handled it deftly and lightly enough." The on-screen results show that Price was unwilling to forego the stylised manner that had become his trademark, while Lorre, given to ad-libbing, was probably all but undirectable. (As for Karloff, he has only a few opportunities to make an impression in his small part.) One of the broadest performances is given by Joyce Jameson, as Price's opera-singing wife. The actress chafed under Tourneur's direction, as she revealed to David Del Valle:



He was very fierce and very dogmatic about the way he wanted scenes played in comparison with Roger Corman, who let us do just about anything we wanted. I personally think the freedom Roger allowed us made it more successful and much more interesting. For example, during the drinking sequence in *Tales of Terror* or between some of the cute moments I had with Peter on that film, we established a camaraderie that carried over into *The Comedy of Terrors*. I took great pleasure in every scene I did with Peter, whether it was our dancing sequence or his listening to me doing bad opera. Had Roger directed *Comedy* instead of Jacques you would not have felt the heavy hand of a European director so much. Roger would have given it a lighter and faster pace. I don't think Jacques Tourneur was a good director in spite of his reputation and Peter's illness brought heaviness to the production that was absent when we did *Tales of Terror*.

There is indeed a certain heaviness throughout *The Comedy of Terrors*. The dark tone of Matheson's script, the cramped and uncomfortable look of Daniel Haller's sets (as decorated by Harry Reif and lit by Floyd Crosby) and Les Baxter's frenetic music create a queasy atmosphere that is curiously remote from the expansiveness of Corman's Poe films, even though Tourneur inherited the same production team who had worked for Corman. If Corman's films were, in Vincent Canby's phrase, "Pepsi-Cola Gothic", the grim mood of *The Comedy of Terrors* is like wine fortified with vermouth.

Tourneur's films are not notable for their humour; when it is present, humour tends to arise naturally out of situation and character, as in the early light farces *Toto* (1933) and *Les filles de la concierge* (1934), in





the deadpan irony of the heroes of *Out of the Past* and *Nightfall* (1957) or in the boisterous interplay of acrobatic partners Burt Lancaster and Nick Cravat in *The Flame and the Arrow*. The broadness of the humour in *The Comedy of Terrors* must come as a surprise to viewers steeped in the melancholy that is the key note of Tourneur's work, and Matheson's testimony shows that the director would have preferred a drier approach but was at a loss to rein in his cast. Appreciated on its own terms, however, the playing of the *Comedy of Terrors* ensemble is energetic and sometimes hilarious, and the actors' enjoyment of Matheson's robust dialogue can be infectious. Infused with the outsider spirit of both Matheson and Tourneur, *The Comedy of Terrors* stands as a singular attempt at a kind of black comedy that Hollywood had rarely attempted.

Chris Fujiwara is the author of Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall (Johns Hopkins University Press), among other books on film.

Sources:

David Del Valle, *The Comedy of Terrors/The Raven* (DVD review), www.dvddrive-in.com/reviews/a-d/comedyterrorsraven63.htm

Chris Fujiwara, *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Mick Martin, "Matheson: A Name to Conjure With!" *Cinefantastique* Volume 3, Number 2 (1974)

Tom Weaver, *Science Fiction Stars and Horror Heroes: Interviews with Actors, Directors, Producers and Writers of the 1940s through 1960s*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2006.



About the Transfer

The Comedy of Terrors is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with mono 2.0 sound. The High-Definition master for this release was made available by MGM via Hollywood Classics.

Production Credits

Discs and booklet produced by Ewan Cant

Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni

Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje

Technical Producer: James White

QC and Proofing: Ewan Cant, Anthony Nield

Subtitling: IBF Digital

Authoring: Utd by Content

Artist: Paul Shipper

Design: Jack Pemberton

Special Thanks

Alex Agran, David Cairns, David DeCoteau,
David Del Valle, Scott Grossman, Timo Langer,
Alistair Leach, Jennifer Rome, Melanie Tebb, Fiona Watson.





FCD1041